

## EXPLORATIONS OF A SCOTTISH STRIP CLUB: LIMINALITY, FEMALE SEXUALITY, AUTONOMY, AND IDENTITY

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### Physical Space

**B**ass music. Scarlet lights. A disco ball hanging from the ceiling, gleaming and shimmering, casting dazzling slivers of light across the sanguine room. A glamorous bar with a myriad of bottles tinted crimson by the sultry lighting. Black leather couches contouring the perimeter of the room. My gaze is instantly drawn to the small stage in the centre of room, with a metal pole stretching from the platform to the ceiling. Scattered across this space are a dozen or so glamorous young women clad in high heels and lingerie, made up faces, hair curled or straightened to perfection. Some are sitting down, some are standing at the bar, chatting with customers or amongst themselves. Doormen guard the entrance to the floor.

Genevieve's is a lap-dancing club located in Glasgow, exhibiting a vertical fluorescent red light in rhinestone-encrusted capitals, representing a dichotomy with the overflowing dumpsters and graffiti-ridden murals opposite, a mere few meters away. The atmosphere immediately changes as I walk onto the street of the club, as the bustling frenzy dissolves into a peculiar quiet.

The club has three floors, each with a bar. Standard dances take place downstairs, stag do's take place on the middle floor, and VIP or private dances take place on the top floor. Each floor is equipped with spaces for dances. The first two floors have a pole for girls to dance on. Women take customers for either standard dances which last anywhere from three to twelve minutes, or VIP dances which last anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour. All dances are topless. A three-minute dance costs £10, a six-minute dance costs £20, and so on. Dances upstairs take place in a private room, and those lasting half an hour or more are accompanied by a complementary bottle of champagne. It must be noted that customers are not permitted to touch the lap-dancers at any point; this is a strict rule of the club.

When asked what the difference was between dances upstairs and downstairs, all the lap-dancers told me that the dances upstairs are the same as downstairs, except that dances upstairs last longer and take place in a private room. Dances upstairs have more of

an element of privacy or intimacy, with dances downstairs sometimes taking place right next to another dance.

The present ethnography focuses on women working as lap-dancers in Genevieve's, a Glasgow strip club, and aims to overthrow the stigma of lap-dancing as a profession by underlining sexual power, autonomy, and identity through demonstrating the strip club as a liminal platform. I visited Genevieve's on both weeknights and weekend nights. The methodology used for my fieldwork was participant observation in its simplest form, as well as semi-structured interviews, with both open and closed-ended questions. I refrained from speaking to customers because I hoped to focus on the women who work in the strip club themselves, emphasizing the voices and narratives of the women I spoke to, while representing them as accurately as possible. For ethical purposes, the names of the women included in this ethnography have been changed, and a pseudonym is used for the club itself in order to preserve anonymity.

### **The Strippers**

Keeping in mind that the women I interviewed were all working during the time I conducted my fieldwork, some interviews were interrupted due to a customer walking in. I prefaced my conversations with my informants by explaining that I was conducting research and therefore would not be purchasing any dances. Women who work in the strip club are dancers and make their money by doing lap-dances. However, making conversation with customers can be an integral aspect of what this occupation entails. For the purposes of clarity, I will throughout this work be referring to my informants as 'strippers' as this is how they identified themselves. I do, however, use the terms 'stripper' and 'lap-dancer' interchangeably.

Some strippers were more willing to speak to me than others, and in general, it was easier to engage them in conversation on quieter nights, as well as earlier on in the evening, before it usually became busy. On weekend nights, I mainly observed from a corner in the room. Some women approached me to chat, presumably in the hopes of persuading me to buy a dance. However, they tended to move on quite quickly upon realising the purpose of my presence.

During lulls in business, I witnessed the women sitting around tables, standing at the bar, speaking amongst themselves, or casually having a drink. Whenever customers walked in, strippers would usually approach them within a matter of minutes. Strippers would chat with customers, sometimes going to sit down at a table, or standing up at the bar.

One stripper told me, 'We get all sorts [of customers] in here: lonely old men just looking to chat, business men in suits and ties, punters just looking for a laugh and a cheap dance, couples, sometimes lesbians, sometimes total creeps, and lots of stag do's.'

Usually, after speaking for a certain amount of time, the stripper and the customer would walk up to the bar to purchase a dance. If not, the stripper typically left and moved onto the next customer, or bought herself another drink. Strippers would sometimes only speak to a customer for ten minutes before moving on, or may have sat and chatted for half an hour or more. Many customers would buy the strippers drinks, before or after dances, or sometimes even instead of dances.

Dances are paid for at the bar, and women are given tokens in exchange for cash. The strippers cash in their tokens at the end of the night and receive the money they made from the night before. Women keep 50-60% of all the money they make, and the club keeps the rest.

### **The strip club as a liminal space**

Ryan and Martin (2001) argue that the strip club is a liminal theatre in which the normal is made strange, and the strange made normal. They frame strip tease as a form of sex tourism taking place in a 'complex theatre where men pursue the view of the dancing naked female form, appreciate, at least in many cases, the art within the dance'(Ryan & Martin 2001: 156).

Characterised by marginality and ritual, the strip club can be seen as a liminal place, where the customers visit, acting as tourists. The strip club lies somewhere on the margins of the social order, somewhere between what is acceptable and unacceptable, where role play, fantasy, sexual bonding, hedonism, and voyeurism are abundant (*Ibid*). For customers, this is an experience outside the norms of everyday life.

*'In particular, these spaces provide an opportunity for a tourist-like experience in which individuals explore gender and sexuality in an environment that is largely premised on an idealised conception of sexuality and freedom' (Elund 2015: 5).*

Ryan and Martin (2001) argue that the interaction between the stripper and the observer is a liminal experience (Ryan & Martin 2001: 144) because it is an experience outside of the norm, often characterised by reversed gender roles. They also argue that both tourists and strippers are liminal people, 'with the former socially condoned and the latter tolerated to greater or lesser degrees' (*Ibid*).

Melanie told me, 'This place is like a whole different world. It almost feels like you're not at work sometimes...I usually just stand at the bar, chatting to people, getting drunk...It kind of feels like a night out, in a weird way.'

Ashley said, 'I love this job. What other place can I get paid to walk about in my underwear, dress in sexy lingerie, drink champagne, and dance for people? It's the perfect job for me.'

The strip club is therefore liminal because it is characterised by a culture of hedonism and free sexuality which is subversive to the outside world of conformity and sexual conservatism. The strip club is a place of deviance, as it transgresses social boundaries. This contrast to the standardised social order and the private nature of sexual activity is the epitome of the liminal nature of the strip club.

### **Strippers as liminal people**

Liminality is characterised by ambiguity; therefore, liminal persons 'elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space' (Turner 1995: 95). Strippers are not quite sex workers, but their line of work is viewed as being sexual in nature. Strippers are seen to exist somewhere on the spectrum of sex work (Ryan & Martin 2001: 142), yet they are not sex workers *per se*.

Although stripping is legal in Scotland, there is still a social stigma surrounding this profession. Most of the women I spoke to reported facing stigma with regards to their occupation, characterised by judgment they have felt from others, as well as the discomfort or fear of divulging what they do for a living to friends and family. Most of the strippers I spoke to told me that their parents do not know about their job, and if one parent did know, the other usually did not.

Katherine, for example, lives and studies in Edinburgh but commutes to Glasgow to strip so that no one she knows will find out that she is a stripper. She told me, 'Only my closest friends know I do this; it's not something I really like to advertise.'

Rachel said, 'My mum knows [that I work as a stripper], we have a very open relationship, I tell her everything...My dad would kill me if he found out I did this.'

Lindsey: 'My parents don't know I do this...None of my friends even know I do this. They think I work in a nightclub.'

Ashley: 'My mum found out that I do this last summer. She followed me to work and then pretended she didn't know for months. I had lied to them [my parents] about what I was doing...I said I worked behind a bar in a nightclub. When my mum finally told me that she knew what I did, she was fucking raging. She was screaming and shouting at me in a restaurant in Spain, she threw a glass of wine at me and called me a slut...But at the end of the day, it's my body and my choice. I'm an adult and I can do whatever the fuck I want with my body.'

Bodies are shaped socially, culturally, and ultimately politically (Csordas 1994; Conklin 1996; Lock 1993; Strathern 1992, 1995; Elund 2015; etc.). Jude Elund argues that bodies are often experienced as objects as a result of living in a consumerist, capitalist society which places exchange value and commodification on the body, making it 'displayed and performed, consumed by others' (Elund 2015: 19). The cultural regulation of the objectified body produces normative performance, and 'corporeal displays outside of this normative order are labelled immoral or divergent: a problematic body' (*Ibid*). Strippers' bodies exemplify this problematic body, as they exist on the margins of the normative order.

Strippers are often characterised as immoral because they are sexually deviant from the norm, thus posing a threat to dominant ideologies.

Melanie said, 'The amount of customers that tell me I'm "way too good for this job" annoys me so much...it's such a backhanded compliment...As if this occupation is something to be looked down upon.'

Mary Douglas (1996) argues that danger lies in what deviates from the ideal or existing order of society (Douglas 1996: 3). Things that threaten social order are perceived as dangerous, and are upheld by binary notions of cleanliness and uncleanness, which reflect sociological moral values. 'Certain moral values are upheld, and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion' (*Ibid*). Douglas argues that there is a power, and therefore inherent danger, in liminality, as it is ambiguous and undefined.

Because many of the issues that people have with stripping stem from issues concerning morality, strippers and strip clubs are linked with ideas of pollution, contagion, and uncleanness. Strip clubs are often seen as immoral, not because the strippers themselves are necessarily immoral, but because they are seen as sexually deviant, and are therefore threatening to social order. Indulging in lap-dances, even sexual pleasure of any form, is often frowned upon by the general public, and even some customers who frequent the strip club, for moral reasons, characterised as dirty and voyeuristic, when in reality it is merely subversive to pre-existing social norms. Issues with strippers themselves reflect this concern of morality and social order, as similar sentiments of strippers being dirty, impure or unclean are common. In actuality, it is the subversion of patriarchal order as a result of embracing female sexuality, power, autonomy, and agency, that the strippers are painted in this light.

Douglas explains that 'Many ideas about sexual danger are better interpreted as symbols of the relation between parts of society, as mirroring designs of hierarchy or symmetry which apply in the larger social system' (Douglas 1996: 4). Female sexuality is seen as dangerous because it poses a threat to the existing patriarchal social order, thus illuminating sex and gender-based social hierarchies and inequalities.

## Female Sexuality, Bodily Autonomy, and Power

Schalet, Hunt, and Joe-Laidler (2003) argue that female sexuality is located at a nexus of pleasure and danger (*Ibid*). Indeed, female sexuality and pleasure are powerful and therefore threatening to the patriarchal order. The strip club is a place of female sexual power and subsequently danger, and is thus subversive to dominant patriarchal ideologies.

The women who work in Genevieve's have autonomy in their occupation, relative to other jobs in the service or entertainment industry, as a result of the liminal nature of the strip club. The strippers have the power to choose who they speak to and who they dance for. Strippers are not allowed to be touched by the customers and can end a dance at any time if they feel uncomfortable, unsafe, or if the customer is violating the no touching rule.

Charlotte: 'I was waitressing before I did this. The money wasn't great, and if a customer was rude to you, you still had to smile and be polite to them no matter what. Some guys were dead creepy as well, but you still had to serve them...In here, obviously the money's a lot better, and I can choose who I want to talk to and who I want to dance for. If a customer's rude to me, I can tell him to fuck off. And if a customer's being creepy, he'll get *papped oot* <sup>1</sup>.'

Due to the strict no touching rules, if this social contract is violated, strippers are not only permitted but *expected* to end the dance and notify a bouncer. For example, Jennifer told me that she feels very safe, protected, and in control at work: 'We always have the option to stop a dance if we need to, and there are bouncers here to protect us...If I don't want to do a dance, I don't have to.'

Thus, the women who work in Genevieve's have total control over their bodies, and a great deal of control over their social interactions within the club. Many of the women I spoke with expressed that they find their job empowering. Ashley told me, 'Walking around half naked is incredibly empowering and a lot of fun. I've always been a bit of an exhibitionist so this is pretty much the perfect job for me...I love it.' Lindsey said, 'This job has given me a lot more confidence and helped with my self-esteem...It's definitely given

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish colloquial term for being kicked out or escorted out of a club

me thicker skin.’ Rachel reiterated this sentiment: ‘Being able to turn guys on, it makes you feel dead powerful; I love being in control...I feel right sexy when I’m at work...It’s a good feeling.’ Jennifer said, ‘In here, I feel so fucking powerful; I feel like Beyonce...It’s the first time in my life I’ve ever felt in control of a social situation.’ Katherine explained, ‘Dancing on the pole is so much fun. When I’m up on that pole, I know that the whole room has their eyes on me.’

Strippers do not get paid to dance on the pole, unless in some cases in which they are arbitrarily tipped by a customer, however this is rare. While dancing on the pole functions as a way of attracting attention from customers, it is also a form of art and expression, symbolising strippers’ bodily autonomy and feelings of empowerment. It is precisely this power, this bodily autonomy and agency, which silently subverts the patriarchal social order.

Strippers are paid on commission, some making hundreds of pounds a night, giving them financial independence and the subsequent power to subvert and challenge the traditional role of housewife. Indeed, financial motivation is the key reason many strippers seem to have chosen this job. Every single woman I spoke to mentioned money as a motivating factor for becoming a stripper, regardless of age, class, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background.

Several of the women I spoke with are single mothers with children, and stripping provides them with a means of income necessary to support a child. Some women began stripping before falling pregnant and others turned to stripping once they found out that they were pregnant. Several of the strippers I spoke with are students at university and strip as a part-time job to help with the associated costs of attending university. A few of the strippers I spoke to have other part-time jobs that they work in combination with stripping, while others I spoke to simply strip full time.

Because women are systematically subordinated by dominant patriarchal ideologies, the strip club, as a liminal space which enables female empowerment, autonomy, and agency through the safe exploration of female sexuality, subverts dominating patriarchal order.



## **Stripper Names: The Creation of an Alter Ego**

Sökefeld (1999) argues that identity is pluralistic and characterised by multiplicity, that the self is interlinked with and composed of multiple, shifting, and plural identities. 'The contemporary self is depicted as fragmented, essentially fluid and many-sided, or populated by multiplicities' (Sökefeld 1999: 417).

The strippers in Genevieve's are required to choose an alias, a dancing name that they are referred to when they are at work. The 'house mum' of the club, responsible for looking after the strippers and dealing with any issues that may arise, said that the women who work in Genevieve's are required to choose a stage name for their own safety:

'It protects your identity. Let's say, for example, you're walking in town with your mum and someone you've danced for the night before comes running up to you, shouting your name, at least they'll be shouting the wrong name and you can simply pretend like you don't know them.'

The alter ego, from a managerial perspective, thus essentially serves the purpose of protecting the stripper's 'true' identity. However, a by-product of adopting a contextual identity unique to the strip club is the ability to create a different, sometimes idealised, version of the self which serves a situational purpose. By adopting a new identity, an alter ego, the women working in the strip club create and embody a different version of the self, which is inherently interlinked with the liminal space of the club. The liminal nature of the space which the strip club inhabits, provides a platform which allows for explorations and embodiments of different versions of the self.

Elund (2015) discusses the creation of avatars in her ethnography on Second Life, a three-dimensional interactive virtual world characterised by liminality. The avatars, or 'personalised representations' (*Ibid*) created by users to navigate this virtual realm can be likened to the alter egos embodied by the strippers in Genevieve's.

According to Elund (2015), embodiment is a dynamic process of continual reconstruction because 'it is subject to internal and external reflection' (Elund 2015: 22).

Strippers 'continually reconfigure their identity and ways of being' (*Ibid*) in the club, as there is no set script or choreography for their performance. Strippers at Genevieve's have autonomy and agency in their actions and are thus free to follow their own stream of consciousness as they work. When asked if she felt like the same person inside and outside of work, Jennifer said:

'No way, man. I get social anxiety outside of work. It can be hard to talk to people, sometimes even just going to the shops and that, I won't look people in the eye...People scare me, man. I struggle to get naked in relationships; I won't even take my bra off when I'm having sex. I'm really self-conscious about my body because I have small boobs, but guys in here don't really care if you have small boobs.'

Similarly, Ashley told me:

'Outside of work, I'm very shy, go with the flow, quiet and reserved. But in work, I hustle, I'm a sexy bad ass bitch who knows what she wants and knows how to get it...I guess in here, you can be anyone you want to be. No one knows who you are, and there's nothing to lose by going up to each customer and chatting to them and acting sexy. But confidence is key. It honestly doesn't really matter how good you are at dancing or how you look. It's all about confidence.'

Strippers thus embody an identity that is specific to the context of the strip club. The liminal nature of the strip club provides a platform for strippers to explore different parts of the self. The embodiment of an alter ego is inherently intertwined with the liminality of the space in which the alter ego is able to exist.

'Mind, body and environment constantly interact, being inseparable from social interaction and culture' (Elund 2015: 18). Through embodying a contextual identity and adopting situational self-representations and behaviours that may differ from outside of work, strippers are utilizing a different version or part of the self and actively creating and manipulating different dimensions of the mind, and therefore reality.

Many parallels can be drawn between representations of the self in the strip club and in virtual environments, which are also liminal in nature (Elund 2015). Fair (2000) argues

that self-representation and identity are contextual, as evidenced by a correlation between Native American's self-representation and the expected audience on tribal websites. Websites directed to a broader audience tended to use more stereotypical imagery of Native Americans, whereas sites directed towards a particular audience or specific native community emphasised a more specific tribal identity (*Ibid*). For example, exoticized contemporary photographs and non-contextualized historical photographs of chiefs wearing traditional, 'authentic' clothing were used on Native American websites directed to a larger audience in order to appeal to tourists. 'This romanticized and nostalgic depiction of Native Americans leaves the impression that the tribe is traditional, unchanging, timeless, "authentic"' (Fair 2000: 207).

Thus, the self-identity of these Native Americans representing themselves online was highly contextual and dependent on the audience. This ethnographic research exemplifies the multifaceted nature of identity, revealing identity as situational, adaptive, and able to serve multiple purposes.

Similarly, the women working in the strip club represent themselves in a way that is specific to the context of the club. Their alter egos are situational and serve a specific purpose within the strip club's liminal space. The contextual nature of strippers' identity and self-representation poses questions for authenticity that I am not able to address in this current ethnography.

## **Conclusion**

The strip club exists within a liminal place. Due to the liminal nature of the strip club, strippers at Genevieve's are able to embody an alter ego within the club space, a contextual identity which serves a situational purpose. The strip club, as a place of sexual deviance and a nexus of female power and sexuality, is seen as subversive to the patriarchal social order. Strippers, as a marginalized group of people, still face a great deal of social stigma surrounding their occupation. However, the strippers in Genevieve's possess power, autonomy, agency, and control as a result of working in a liminal space that has certain rules in place to protect their safety while simultaneously allowing them certain freedoms as

employees. This ethnographic fieldwork has wider implications for anthropological theories on identity, autonomy, agency, female sexuality, and liminality.

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